

Women's political participation: A comparative study of gender quota implementation in six Western Balkan countries

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Abstract

Women's political participation has increased globally over the course of the 21st century. However, this positive development is less reflected in countries in development, as women continue to rely heavily on affirmative measures such as gender quotas to enter politics. The lack of women's political participation disrupts human rights and undermines democracy. This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of gender quota regimens on women's political participation in the six Western Balkans countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Qualitative research case study methods were used to analyze the policies on the implementation of gender quotas. The findings show that (i) six countries subject to this study have legislated gender quotas for women's political representation, requiring 30-40% women's representation in electoral lists (ii) the implementation of gender quotas has ensured positive women's numerical representation in legislated bodies and (iii) the quotas have been less effective in achieving substantial representation of women in positions of power, as the political leadership continues to favor male candidates for decision-making. This study has important implications. It shows that gender quotas can be an effective mechanism to ensure that women are numerically represented in politics, especially in countries where men traditionally have dominated the political sphere such as in the Western Balkans. This study also underscores the potential of gender quotas as a powerful tool for augmenting women's representation in pivotal decision-making roles.

Keywords: Political participation; women; gender quotas; public policy; Western Balkan countries

INTRODUCTION

Political participation plays a vital role in the progress of society toward democracy. It aids in the growth and betterment of citizens by enabling them to express their desires, needs, and interests to decision-makers. Political participation serves as a means to set practical social objectives that cater to the wants and requirements of all members of the community, and it's crucial for building a healthy democratic society (Verba & Nie, 1972; Van Deth, 2016). For countries in transition that have undergone major changes to their political systems, the journey to democratic governance is faced with countless challenges of encouraging and ensuring the political participation of all citizens, regardless of their gender, and socioeconomic and cultural differences (Norris, 2002; Nacevska & Lokar, 2017).

Moreover, the journey to democratic development implies respecting the principle of equality and representation of all citizens in society (Hughes, 2011). Many countries within the Western Balkans, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia have undergone changes from Communist and Socialist Regimes, transitioning towards democratic political systems. During the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1990s, gender equality in conventional politics was hindered in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. This was a consequence of the neglected importance of gender equality compared to other significant activities in post-conflict reconstruction, such as peacebuilding, economic recovery, and political reconstruction (Nacevska, 2014). Additionally, the fall of the communist regime in Albania in the 90ies enabled a slow establishment of an egalitarian political system that acknowledged the importance of equality (Dhembo, 2010).

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Received : 7 November 2023

Accepted : 25 November 2023

Online Published : 29 December 2023

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<https://www.journalser.com>

Cite this article as: Limani, M. (2023). Women's political participation: A comparative study of gender quota implementation in six Western Balkan countries. *Journal of Social and Educational Research*, 2(2), 23-32. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10440926>

Research in the Western Balkans region has yielded various findings regarding the under-representation of women in politics. The culture of patriarchy, marked by the pervasive dominance of gender roles in society and the prioritization of men's power and authority over women through ingrained societal beliefs, values, and practices, continues to endure in the Western Balkans. This persistent culture shapes stereotypes and restricts women's roles within both the family and society, thereby curbing their involvement in formal institutions (Brown, 2017; Limani, 2019; Limani et al., 2018; Nacevska, 2019; Nacevska & Lokar, 2017). The authority for political decision-making in Western Balkans countries is strongly centered on men, which, combined with prevailing patriarchal norms in the society, makes it even more difficult for women to get voted for political posts (Vojvodic, 2020). Additionally, civil wars and conflicts along ethnic lines in the Western Balkans with the dissolution of Yugoslavia had a parallel in "gender wars", as they were instrumental in fostering conflictual and oppressive perspectives of social relations (Di Lellio, 2016; Hughson, 2012). According to research by Di Lellio (2016), the intertwining of the concepts of femininity and masculinity, along with societal expectations surrounding sexuality, intersected with the dimension of ethnicity. This convergence acted as a powerful catalyst fueling the mobilization of war in the former Yugoslavia (Di Lellio, 2016). In the lead-up to the conflict in the Balkans Region, Yugoslav society's re-solidification of patriarchal values took place, contributing to a reductionist conceptualization of gender roles. This was reflected in the gender representation during the wars, where women were passive and voiceless. Even the discourse of the nationalist regimes portrayed women's emancipation as an 'unnatural' effect of the socialist system (Haug, 2013). Thus, the idea of 'militant masculinity' assigned men the role of aggressive warriors who could engage in ethnonational warfare, while women were viewed primarily as biological reproducers or caretakers of the nation (Berna, 2014; Haug, 2013; Hughson, 2012).

Furthermore, the wars reinforced gender stereotypes, entrenched traditional norms regarding the role of women, and fostered religious traditionalism concerning gender. For example, research by Duhaček, 2015 shows that the political leadership and military forces involved in the dissolution of Yugoslavia in Serbia re-established traditional "family values," which had adverse effects on gender equality and women's human rights. Whereas Di Lellio (2016) research in Kosovo shows that after the war, the political leaders who took power upheld traditional masculine ideals of "valour" and "patriotism", which led to the persistence of gender stereotypes and hindered progress toward gender equality.

While women faced major obstacles to engaging in formal institutions and political processes, across the Western Balkans they were still able to form transnational networks that later became highly important mechanisms for advocacy on gender equality and human rights in a post-conflict setting (Korac, 2016). The unconventional participation of women in the public sphere is also cherished in the civil society sector. For instance, women's NGOs in Serbia played a leading role in resisting nationalism and combatting the militaristic and patriarchal

practices of the Milosevic regime, as they took responsibility as citizens (Duhaček, 2015; Irvine, 2013). Similarly, in Kosovo, women organized themselves as part of a parallel Kosovar society opposing the Serbian authoritarian regime during the 1990s and they applied this experience to the country's reconstruction efforts after 1999 (Irvine, 2013). During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, several women's groups emerged with the goal of providing psychological support and counseling to women (Simić, 2015). Furthermore, Hughson (2014) and Risteka (2011) argue that the dominance of ethnic divisions in political life in post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans has had an impact on the ways countries such as North Macedonia and Montenegro addressed gender issues in their countries. In North Macedonia, this ethnic division among Albanian and Macedonian ethnic groups in political representation has marginalized other groups within the individual ethnic groups – in particular women. Whereas, in Montenegro, a male-dominated political sphere resisted and constrained women's abilities to meaningfully engage in politics (Hughson, 2014; Risteka, 2011). The strong patriarchal societal values existed in Albania also under Communism (Becker, 1983). During the communist regime, initiatives were launched to establish legal equality for women and provide them with formal opportunities to engage in all areas of society. Despite these efforts, the strong traditional norms continued to heavily influence women's daily lives, leading to their inability to instill strong symmetrical gender relations. As a result, shortly after the fall of communism, women in Albania lost formal protections in terms of gender equality in politics and other spheres (Canolli, 2002).

A common feature of the Western Balkans countries towards democratization and more egalitarian laws and policies is that they were all driven by the desire to meet the democratic standards in their aspirations and processes for integration into the European Union. This goal to join the European Union (EU), often translated as an encouraged pressure by the international community, led to Western Balkan countries embracing gender equality policies that directly affected women and their position in the political sphere (Nacevska, 2014; Vojvodic, 2020). In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process, a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the Western Balkans. The SAA aimed to support the gradual rapprochement of the Western Balkan with the EU. As such, this framework established an accession process that requires countries to fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria and harmonize legislation with EU *acquis communautaire* (EU Fact Sheet, 2023). The status of Western Balkan countries in the EU accession process is that four countries Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are official candidates for membership to the EU, whereas Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina are classified as potential candidate countries (European Commission 2019).

Importantly, in the dynamics of the development of policies for encouraging the political participation of women, countries in the Western Balkans introduced gender quotas in election laws. According to Dahlerup (2008), quotas are defined as affirmative measures for achieving a targeted percentage of the political presence of specific groups within a society.

Moreover, Dahlerup (2008) further elaborated on the dimensions of quotas, shown to be of two main models (i) defined according to the level of the electoral process, and (ii) defined according to the mandates. The first model is reflected in reserved seats, which include a list of positional candidates, election candidates, and elected candidates. Whereas the second model is reflected in legal quotas usually embedded in the Constitution of specific laws, and with voluntary quotas adopted by political parties (Dahlerup, 2008).

To understand the impact of gender quotas on women's political participation, this research conducts a comparative study in six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

METHOD

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing case study methods, to conduct a comparative analysis of the impact of gender quota regimens on women's political participation in the Western Balkans region. The study focuses on six countries in the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This comparison among six Western Balkan countries is important, since all these countries have shared experiences of regime changes, most of these countries are undergoing post-conflict transition, and all are in the process of European Integration which affects gender equality and women's position in society.

Data collection

The primary data source for this study is a comprehensive document review of policy documents, legislative acts, government reports, and academic literature related to gender quotas and women's political participation in selected Western Balkans countries. These documents include Electoral Laws, Gender Quota Legislation and Policies, Reports from governments and non-governmental organizations, academic articles, and research papers. Also, for the quota comparison, we have relied on research data on gender quotas from the International IDEA database, which is a joint project of the International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Stockholm University, and the Global Database of Gender Quotas in parliaments worldwide.

Data analysis

The comparative analysis involved a cross-country examination of the identified themes and sub-themes. It aimed to highlight similarities and differences in the implementation and impact of gender quota regimens in the Western Balkans countries. The analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to the varying levels of women's political participation in each country.

GENDER QUOTA ADOPTION IN SIX WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The six Western Balkan Countries were reflected with various timeframes on the adoption of gender quotas in their legislation. According to scholars Domi (2002) and Boric (2004), the adoption of gender quotas in the Western Balkan countries was directly a result of post-conflict considerations and the embrace of international gender equality policies (Domi, 2002; Boric, 2004).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legislated gender quota is embedded in the electoral code, more specifically in article 4.19 which establishes that "Every candidate's list shall include candidates of the male and female gender, who are equally represented". The equal representation of the genders shall exist in the case when one of the genders is represented with a minimum of 40% of the total number of candidates on the list. The minority-gender candidates shall be distributed on the candidate's list in the following manner: at least one minority-gender candidate amongst the first two candidates, two minority-gender candidates amongst the first five candidates, and three minority-gender candidates amongst the first eight candidates" (OSCE, 2017). When the quota representation is not achieved, based on the Electoral code, legal sanctions for noncompliance are imposed. Accordingly, if the Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina identifies incorrect or incomplete information, it shall notify the applicant thereof, who shall be bound to correct the information within two days. Upon the expiration of this deadline, the Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina shall decide whether or not to certify or reject the application for participation in the elections." Importantly, the Electoral Code ensures a rank order for candidates in the implementation of gender quotas. As such, the minority gender candidates shall be distributed on the candidate's list in the following manner: at least one minority gender candidate amongst the first two candidates, two minority gender candidates amongst the first five candidates, and three minority gender candidates amongst the first eight candidates (Election Code, 2017). The legislated gender quota of 40% also applies at the Sub-National Level in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where parties' elected lists shall include candidates of the male and female gender, who are equally represented. If these requirements are not met, the Election Commission has the legal right to provide penalties for non-compliance, thus rejecting political party or coalition lists (Election Code, 2017).

In Kosovo, the use of gender quotas in politics dates back to the post-war period in 1999. In 2000, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) issued a regulation that mandated all political parties to ensure at least 30% representation for the minority gender in the electoral lists. This was later reinforced through the Law on General Elections, which reserved a minimum of 30% of seats in the National Assembly of Kosovo and Municipal assemblies for the minority gender. This means that guaranteed seats are practically defined for women in these political bodies considering their political under-representation (General Elections Law, 2008). The General Elections Law

specifies rank order/placement rules for political parties to comply with the quota. Any Political Entity's candidate list must include at least 30% women candidates. At least one candidate from the minority gender must be included at least once in every group of three candidates, starting from the first candidate on the list. Also, legal sanctions exist in the law in case of non-compliance with the quota. According to Article 111.6 of the General Elections Law, if a Political Entity's minority-gender candidates are not allocated at least 30% of the total seats after the seat allocation process, the last elected candidate of the majority gender will be replaced by the next candidate of the opposite gender on the candidate list until the total number of seats allocated to the minority gender reaches at least 30%. Gender quotas in Kosovo are also foreseen in the Law on Gender Equality. Adopted initially in 2004, the Law on Gender Equality foresaw a 40% quota for the minority gender in political and public life. Later, in 2018, this law was amended to strengthen the aspects of non-discrimination, upon which it also raised the gender quota. Thus, the current law defines unequal representation as "when representation and participation of one gender is less than fifty percent (50%) at any level of decision-making in political and public life" (LGE 05/L-020). However, this law has faced serious problems in implementation since its development in 2004, among other weaknesses, the law lacks the reinforcement measures for sanctions in case of non-compliance. To date, the Law on General Elections and the Law on Gender Equality envisage different gender quota ceilings, however, in practice only the quota requirements embedded in the Law on General Elections continue to be implemented (Limani, 2019; DEMOS, 2021).

North Macedonia was the second among the Western Balkan countries to adopt gender quotas. The Election Law on Members of Parliament (MP) in Macedonia introduced 30% quotas in the year 2002. According to Antić Gaber and Lokar (2006), in North Macedonia, the Stabilization Agreement with the European Union and pressure from the Macedonian Women's Lobby (MWL) helped to form the initiative referred to as "Gentlemen's Agreement", which directly led to the adoption of quotas in the election's legislation, as an important method to increase women's political representation (Gaber & Lokar, 2006). Accordingly, several laws were passed in the adoption of quotas, such as the Law on Members of Parliament in 2002, the Law on Local Elections in 2004, and the Electoral Code in 2006.

The Electoral Code (Article 64) requires that in all lists of candidates for members of parliament, presented for parliamentary elections, at least 40% of the candidates must belong to the minority gender (Electoral Code 2015). This means that candidates must be equally distributed throughout the election list - on every three positions on the list, one must belong to the minority gender, plus at least one additional position reserved for the minority gender on every ten positions on the candidates' list (Electoral Code, 2015). To ensure the implementation of gender quotas in electoral law, legal sanctions have been introduced in case of non-compliance. If a political party fails to meet the quota requirements, then the Electoral Commission will reject the party's candidate lists, and as a result, the party could be excluded from the elections

(Nacevska & Lokar, 2017). The gender quota applies to situations when a member of parliament undergoes a termination of the term in office or for other reasons that he/she can't exercise the mandate, and if this member of parliament is female, the next female candidate on the list shall become a member of parliament for the remaining duration of the term of office. In North Macedonia, the legislated candidate quotas in electoral law also apply to the local level of governance. The law requires that in the submitted list of candidates for Member of the Council of the municipalities and the City of Skopje, in every three places in the list, at least one will be reserved for the minority gender (Electoral Code 2015). And, if parties fail to accommodate this quota requirement, then their candidate list is rejected. Moreover, the quota applies in the ranking/placement rule, where in every three places (on candidate lists) at least one will be reserved for the minority gender (Electoral Code, 2015). The political parties have a major role in democratization and therefore encourage equality in political participation and representation in North Macedonia. The two major parties in North Macedonia have embraced voluntary political party quotas, that encourage equality in political decision-making positions within the political party: the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) has introduced in its charter a 40% quota for both genders, whereas the Alliance for Albanian's has introduced a party faction, that can be formed on the basis of gender, age group, professional, regional, etc. The faction consists of at least 20% of the members of the Party Assembly (IDEA, 2023).

Serbia adopted gender quotas in 2004. The efforts to implement gender quotas in Serbia were initiated by women activists and supportive politicians, with a particular focus on the Vojvodina region. These initiatives began as early as February 2000 when women organized themselves under the auspices of the Stability Pact Gender Task Force (GTF), a global initiative aimed at stabilizing the previously conflicted nations of the former Yugoslavia. Referred to as a "Palić Conference", this event brought together women representatives of local and regional organizations, politicians, scholars, and other activists that aimed to improve the situation of women in the post-Yugoslavia era. The conference served as a basis for advocacy and demands for greater political representation of women in Serbia, which would be facilitated through the implementation of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and later requirements under EU Stabilization and Association Agreement (Vojvodic, 2020). The national legislated gender quota the Palić women clamored for was eventually passed in 2004 setting a 30% quota requirement for the minority gender in elections (Ballington & Binda, 2004; IDEA, 2023). However, following the 2011 amendments to the Law on Elections at both the national and sub-national levels, the law required that for every three candidates at least one should be of the minority gender, which raises the ceiling of gender quota to 40% (Election Law, 2020). Furthermore, the 2011 amendments introduced closed lists, meaning that Members of Parliament should be extracted from the list of candidates in the same order as they appear on the lists. The law also sets rules for noncompliance penalties, where in case of non-compliance the

political parties are given 48 hours to eliminate the deficiencies, otherwise, the Electoral Commission refuses to announce the electoral list (IDEA, 2023).

Albania adopted gender quotas in 2008. The main drive for Albania to look into enhancing the position of women in politics in a post-communist era was guided by the requirements set in the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Albania has been a party to the CEDAW Convention since 1994, and this treaty has been the country's main guide to tackling gender-based discrimination and aims to achieve women's empowerment in all spheres of life. It took Albania several years since the joining of CEDAW to enhance legislation that would offer incentives and guarantees for women's political participation and equality. The adoption of the National Strategy and the Gender Equality Law in 2004 was the first attempt to enhance gender equality in the country. However, this initial legislation needed revisions in order to introduce further mechanisms that would strengthen women's political participation. As such, changes in the gender equality and election legal framework took place in 2008, when Albania made a significant advance to its legislation regarding the introduction of gender quotas. In 2008, Albania passed the law on Gender Equality, which among other measures, established a minimum 30% quota for women and stipulated that one of the first three names on the political parties' candidate lists must be that of a female candidate. The 30% legislated quota was embedded in the Electoral Code, which serves as the primary legislative framework for electoral issues and defines the types of gender quotas, the roles of relevant institutions, and the penalties for non-compliance. Albania's gender quotas aimed to promote equal participation of women in politics by implementing two types of quotas. The first is a 30% gender quota for the composition of the Assembly and municipal assemblies. The second is a quota for party candidate lists and party coalitions, which varies depending on the election level. For parliamentary elections, political parties must have at least one in every three names on the list from the minority gender, starting from the first name. For local-level elections, the "zebra" model applies, with one in every two consecutive names belonging to the same gender. Distinct from other countries in the Western Balkans, Albania legally mandates a 30% gender quota for the minority genders at all levels of election administration bodies. The Central Election Commission is responsible for ensuring compliance with these

provisions, and non-compliance can result in the refusal of certification of the list. In the past, Albania imposed financial penalties for non-compliance, but the recent electoral reform of 2020 removed financial sanctions and replaced them with certification refusal. These legal changes demonstrate Albania's commitment to promoting gender equality through gender quotas, as the country had only 26% women's representation in the Albanian Parliament in elections prior to 2020 when no such quota existed.

Lastly, Montenegro was among the last countries in the Western Balkans to adopt gender quotas. The weaker prominence placed by women's groups and political parties on gender issues, and the greater resistance toward gender quotas emphasized by the political elites led to this delayed enhancement of legislation (Vojvodic, 2020). Montenegro adopted gender quotas in the elections law in 2011 to include a 30% quota for both genders (OSCE, 2012). While there are no specific laws on gender issues, electoral laws are the only laws that regulate matters relating to gender quotas. Moreover, in 2014, an amendment was added to the electoral law, stating that when the term in office of a member of parliament from the minority gender ends, the next candidate on the electoral list of the minority gender will replace that member of parliament. Furthermore, the law was amended again in 2016, but there were no changes to the articles concerning the legislated candidate quotas. Therefore, Montenegro mandates candidate gender quotas for both parliamentary and local elections, however, there are no reserved seats for women. The electoral legislation requires that the political entity lists must have a minimum of 30% for the minority gender, which is applicable to both central and local elections. In cases where these provisions are not met, the Election Commission has the right to reject the voter list (OSCE, 2012). Additionally, the law specifies that the minority gender candidates must be included in groups of four, counting from the number one candidate. To encourage women's participation, Montenegro employs financial measures to promote gender equality, including allocating a greater share of public funds to entities that adhere to the principle of gender equality. Women's forums within political parties are also supported through regular funding (Vukotić, 2020).

Table 1: Gender Quota Adoption in the six Western Balkan Countries

Country	Number of Members of Parliament (MPs)	Legislated Quotas (national + local)	Reserved Seat Quota	Voluntary Party Quotas	Year Adopted	Sanctions for non-compliance
Albania	140	30%	30%	No	2008	Administrative
Bosnia and Herzegovina	42	40%	No	No	2000	Administrative
Kosovo	120	30%	30%	No	2000	Administrative
Montenegro	81	30%	No	No	2011	Administrative
North Macedonia	151	40%	No	Yes	2002	Financial
Serbia	250	40%	No	No	2004	Administrative

IMPACT OF GENDER QUOTAS ON INCREASING WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Given the political transition context of the countries of the Western Balkans, women's political participation experienced a gradual improvement over the past decades. With the introduction of gender quotas, the countries of the Western Balkans all achieved an increase in women's political participation. The introduction of the legislated quota in Bosnia and Hercegovina led to an increased representation of women at all legislative levels since 2000. As per the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission, in the 2014 elections in Bosnia and Hercegovina, 42% of candidates were women, with 21.4% of the seats obtained by women, showing an increase from 17% representation in the 2010 elections (IPU, 2010). In the 2018 general elections, the number of registered women candidates was substantial, but the proportion of women elected to the Bosnia and Herzegovina Parliament remained at 21.4%. Still, the percentage of women elected on the state level decreased from 23% in the 2014 elections to just 16% (two women) in the 2018 elections (OSCE, 2018).

Similarly, in Montenegro, during the 2012 parliamentary elections, the 30% quota was implemented for the first time, resulting in a significant increase in the number of female candidates, from 14.7% in the previous elections to 31% of all candidates in the 2012 parliamentary elections (IDEA, 2023). According to Brnović (2016), Montenegro reformed the gender quota in 2013 to include a rank-order stipulation, which resulted in more women entering the National Parliament, thus leading to the increase in the percentage of women from 17.3% to 28.4% in the 2016 elections (Brnović, 2016).

Research from Nacevska and Lokar (2017) also shows a positive effect of gender quotas in North Macedonia. According to them, in previous elections in North Macedonia, which utilized a majority or mixed electoral system in 1990, 1994, and 1998, the percentage of elected women was consistently low, ranging from 3.3% to 6.6%. However, following the implementation of a 40% candidate quota for women within the proportional electoral system, the percentage of elected women rose significantly to 18% in 2002. The legislated candidate quota has also been achieved to ensure a diverse representation of women from different ethnic backgrounds in the National Parliaments (Nacevska & Lokar, 2017). In Serbia, women held only 1.7% of posts in the National Parliament in 1992, reaching the highest 5.5% in 2000. However, upon the introduction of the legislated candidate quota in 2004 and its implementation in a parliamentary election in 2007, women's representation in Parliament significantly increased, as women filled 20.4% of the seats (Nacevska & Lokar, 2017). This increase in the number of women elected to Parliament in Serbia was attributed to the imposition of strict penalties on political parties that failed to comply with the gender quota requirements for the minority gender.

Significant differences are also observed in Albania prior to and post-gender quota adoption regarding the number of women running and holding positions in the National Parliaments. Farruku (2015) uses data from the Central Election Commission of Albania to present the election results from 2001 to 2013. The findings show that in the elections of 2001, the percentage of women elected to Parliament was 5.2%. This percentage slightly increased in the elections of 2005 with up to 7%. In 2008, upon the adoption of the gender quota, the subsequent elections in 2009 marked a significant upswing in the representation of women in Parliament. Specifically, there was a notable increase, reaching 16.4% of women holding Member of Parliament positions. The increase continued, where in the national elections of 2013, women held 17.8% of Parliamentary seats (Farruku, 2015).

In Kosovo, the political representation of women in the National Parliament has undergone significant changes over the years as a result of gender quota implementation. During the early post-war period, the representation of women in parliamentary positions was notably limited. In the 2001 general elections, only 34 women were elected out of the available 120 parliamentary seats. In the 2004 elections, a slight improvement was observed, with 36 women elected members of Parliament. It was not until the 2007 elections, which were the first with an open candidate's list, that the number of women elected increased to 37, with more than half elected through the gender quota. A pivotal moment occurred in the last two national elections of 2019, where women constituted 34% of the composition of the National Parliament (DEMOS, 2020).

The examples above are a confirmation that the legislated quotas have had a continuous positive effect in increasing the numbers of women in politics in the six Western Balkan Countries. These countries' results in the latest elections provide further indication that women's political future is moving in a positive direction. The recent data on gender gaps and country performance provided by UN Women (2022) show that women's representation in the National Parliaments in Western Balkans is highest in North Macedonia with 42%, and in Serbia with 40% of the seats held by women. In Albania, women held 36% of seats in the National Parliament, whereas, in Kosovo, this representation was 34%. Among Western Balkan countries, lower representation was observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where women held 26.2% of the parliamentary seats, and in Montenegro, where women's representation was 24.7%.

Regarding women's representation in Local Governments, when we compare the Western Balkan countries, Albania appears to have the highest representation of women with 44%, followed by North Macedonia at 40%, Serbia at 37.2%, Kosovo at 35%, Montenegro at 27%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina at 20% (UN Women, 2022). Altogether, the trends of women's representation in the National Parliaments of Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo show that these countries have successfully complied with the gender quota representation of 30% (in the case of Albania and Kosovo) and 40% (in case of Serbia and North Macedonia). Only Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro continue to fall below their respective quota

thresholds, with rates of 40% and 30%, respectively. A situation comparable to that of national parliaments is apparent in local government parliaments, with the exception of Serbia, which does not meet the 40% quota threshold.

Researchers Nacevska and Lokar (2017) aptly contend that the implementation of gender quotas in the Western Balkans had a positive impact on increasing the representation of women candidates in electoral lists and parliamentary bodies across the examined countries. Although some countries have yet to reach a satisfactory level, overall, they have succeeded in augmenting the political presence of women through numerical representation (Nacevska & Lokar, 2017).

In this instance, it is crucial to inquire as to whether the employment of numerical representations constitutes a satisfactory metric for evaluating the efficacy of gender quotas. In an attempt to answer the dilemma of the effectiveness of gender quotas for women's representation in politics, researchers have constructed an explanatory model through the theory of "critical mass". This theory argues that a threshold number (or percentage) of women in a legislature is necessary for transforming the legislative context from one in which women-friendly policy is unlikely to one in which the opportunities for women's policy success are increased (Tremblay, 2006). Moreover, descriptive (numerical) representation has been argued to be uniquely important for promoting women's engagement in politics. If women look at their representatives in politics and see only men, they might feel that the government is not open to their concerns or that their interests will not be represented (Carroll, 1994; Mansbridge, 1999; Sapiro, 1981). As women run for political office or serve in government, it signals to other women that they can be heard in politics. In contexts with limited experience and support for women's political engagement, such as in countries undergoing transition like those in the Western Balkans, the use of descriptive representation for women through quotas and other encouraging models becomes essential. This approach is necessary to cultivate experience, build knowledge, and inspire the participation of other women (Wolak, 2020; Dahlerup, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2004; Nacevska, 2013). In alignment with this perspective, scholars have contended that achieving a 'critical mass' of women in politics—usually defined as around 30 or 33% representation in positions of power—is necessary to bring about substantive change (Dahlerup, 2017). However, an evolving discourse challenges the adequacy of the critical mass theory, positing that a 30% threshold may not suffice to propel the gender equality agenda in politics. Some argue that we must surpass this numeric benchmark and strive for substantive or meaningful representation that ensures equal opportunities for all (Tremblay, 2006). Consequently, researchers advocate for a shift towards substantive representation as the optimal model, wherein women hold an equal standing with men in political representation and decision-making. This substantive representation of women in politics can be actualized by cultivating a culture of participation, knowledge, and support mechanisms—established during the descriptive representation phase. These factors collectively enable genuine equal

representation of women in positions of power in politics (Mansbridge, 1999; Tremblay, 2006).

From this analysis, it becomes evident that the countries of the Western Balkans still have a considerable distance to cover in order to bolster women's political participation to a self-sustainable level. While there has been a notable increase in numerical representation, it only serves as a partial solution to the issue of underrepresentation. This assertion is substantiated by the ongoing reality that women's presence in positions of power and decision-making remains below the 50% equality threshold in the majority of Western Balkan countries (Nacevska, 2013). Accordingly, scholars Dahlerup (2006) and Phillips (1995) warn that while quotas encourage women's participation in elections, often this does not lead to achieving women's representation in decision-making processes. Referring to gender data from UN Women (2022), women's representation in decision-making positions in Western Balkan countries continues to be under the threshold of gender equality in society, with men dominating positions of power in most of these countries. Based on this data, when comparing Western Balkan countries, Montenegro has the highest share of women at 35% holding managerial positions, followed by Albania at 34.1%, and Serbia at 32.7%. While, in senior and middle management positions Albania leads again with 41.3%, followed by Serbia with 33.6%, then North Macedonia and Montenegro with 28.2%. Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo exhibit the lowest number of women in decision-making positions in Western Balkans, with only 24.3% in managerial positions, and 25.4% - 20% in senior and middle management positions respectively (UN Women, 2022). Also, the share of women holding ministerial roles in several Western Balkan countries is not satisfactory. Countries such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are way below 50-50 equal share of government cabinet of ministers. In Kosovo, women's representation in ministerial roles is 33%, Montenegro 31%, North Macedonia 21%, Bosnia and Herzegovina 19%, and Serbia 43%. Only Albania has exceeded the equality share of women in ministerial posts by 56% (UN Women, 2022). However, of importance is that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia have women in the highest positions of power. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a woman occupies a seat in the Presidency, in Kosovo, a woman holds the position of President, and in Serbia, a woman serves as the Prime Minister. In contrast, in North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro, all top leadership positions are held by men.

DISCUSSION

The legislative and empirical analysis of the gender quotas in the Western Balkan countries including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, reveals a positive impact on increasing the numerical representation of women in politics. Given that all these countries have undergone regime changes in the past 20 years and are still transitioning towards a democratic system, the strides made in women's political participation have been significant. A notable example of this positive development can

be considered in Serbia, where women's representation in national parliament went from as low as 1.7% in the 1992 elections, increasing to 20.7% in the 2007 elections when a legislated gender quota was implemented for the first time. Similar trends of quota effectiveness are observed across all Western Balkans countries covered in this research, with most of them currently meeting or exceeding gender quota thresholds of 30% or 40%, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, which are still below their quota thresholds.

Moreover, the literature on the adoption of gender quotas considers several factors associated with the success of increasing women's representation. Critical factors include the reasons behind the adoption of gender quotas, the types of quotas implemented, legal reforms, and the level of support for quotas among political actors (Krook, 2009; Krook, Lovenduski & Squires, 2009). Notably, there is a significant similarity among Western Balkan countries regarding the reasons for adopting gender quotas, closely tied to their aspirations for European Union membership. Following the decline of socialist and communist regimes, all Western Balkan countries have initiated relations with the European Union in 1999 through the Stabilization and Association Process, marking the initial phase of the European Integration process. This critical process establishes explicit and obligatory legal milestones for Balkan countries, including those related to gender equality and women's empowerment. Consequently, the adoption of gender quotas has played a significant role in integrating more women into national and local parliaments.

However, the six Western Balkan countries have not made desirable progress in advancing women's participation in decision-making roles. Notably, gender quotas for representation in decision-making positions are absent across all these countries, placing the responsibility for women's appointments in such roles on the willingness and readiness of political leadership. The strong male dominance in political leadership continues to hinder the sustainable presence of women in political decision-making in most of the governments in the Western Balkans. An effective solution may involve exploring the implementation of mandatory gender quotas for decision-making posts. Drawing insights from countries that have successfully introduced such policies can provide valuable guidance and best practices, facilitating a smoother integration of mandatory gender quotas into the political landscape.

Limitations and future directions

This study is limited in its generalizability beyond the Western Balkan countries subject to this research, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, due to their distinct historical, cultural, and political contexts. Caution is advised when applying the positive impact of gender quotas observed in these countries to diverse socio-political settings. Moreover, the reliance on numerical data in this study, while providing insights into the numerical representation of women in politics, may overlook the qualitative aspects of substantial representation. This focus on quantifiable metrics does not adequately capture the nuanced effectiveness and impact of women's contributions to politics

and decision-making processes. Future research should address this limitation by exploring substantial representation, considering factors such as the nature of women's engagement, the impact of policy advocacy, and the quality of their contributions, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of gender quotas for political participation.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Financial Disclosure: No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Ethical Approval: No ethical approval was required for this research.

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